How to read Ciceronian Scepticism: Anthony Collins, Richard Bentley, and the Freethought debate in 1713

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Introduction

In 1713 the heterodox writer Anthony Collins published *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, a work that championed a philosophy that allowed men the liberty to determine their beliefs according to their own reason and the available evidence, rather than according to the claims of authority and tradition.[1] This work, in which the virtues that would become synonymous with the more radical elements of the early Enlightenment in England were celebrated, may not at first appear the most obvious place to find a discussion of how Ciceronian Scepticism should be interpreted. There, however, in the third section of the text, following first Collins' definition of Freethinking and then his explanation that it is every man's duty to think freely, he introduces a catalogue of history's most prominent Freethinkers, among whom is Cicero.[2] Collins proves particularly determined to claim Cicero for the Freethinking cause and dedicates several pages of the *Discourse* to championing an interpretation of Ciceronian Scepticism, and consequently of *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione*, which facilitates this identification. The interpretation of Ciceronian Scepticism presented by Collins was soon challenged. Shortly after the *Discourse* was published, a lengthy riposte to its arguments was produced by Richard Bentley – writing under the pseudonym Phileleutherus Lipsiensis – entitled *Remarks Upon a late Discourse of Free-Thinking*.[3] Bentley, incensed by the attacks on the Church that permeated Collins' text, constructed responses to every facet of Collins' argument, structuring his *Remarks* to follow the *Discourse* closely. This included a detailed response to Collins' discussion of Ciceronian Scepticism and Cicero's theological dialogues, which provided an alternative reading intended to strip the Ciceronian tradition of any utility

[1] A. Collins, *A discourse of free-thinking, occasion'd by the rise and growth of a sect call'd free-thinkers* (London 1713). Anthony Collins (1676–1729) was a prominent heterodox writer and a foremost figure among the Deists and the Freethinkers in early Enlightenment England. On Collins see J. O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins: The man and his works* (The Hague 1970); G. Tarantino, *Lo scrittoio di Anthony Collins (1676–1729): I libri e tempi di un libero pensatore* (Milan 2007); G. Tarantino, 'The books and times of Anthony Collins, free-thinker, radical reader and Independent Whig', in *Varieties of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English radicalism in context*, ed. A. Hessayon and D. Finnegan (Farnham and Burlington 2011) 221–40. On the development of the Freethinking philosophy in this period, see S. Ellenzweig, *The fringes of belief: English literature, ancient heresy, and the politics of Freethinking, 1660–1760* (Stanford 2008) 5–15; M. Hunter, *Science and society in Restoration England* (Cambridge 1981) 162–87; D. Berman, *A history of atheism: From Hobbes to Russell* (London 1988) 70–92; J. R. Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England: Theology, politics, and Newtonian public science* (Manchester 2009) 109–41.

[2] Collins, *Discourse of free-thinking* (n. 1, above) 135–40. In order to place this discussion in the broader context of Collins' relationship with Cicero, see G. Tarantino, 'Collins's Cicero, Freethinker', in *Atheism and deism revalued: Heterodox religious identities in Britain, 1650–1800*, ed. W. Hudson, D. Lucci, and J. R. Wigelsworth (London 2014) 81–100.

[3] R. Bentley, *Remarks upon a late discourse of free-thinking* (London 1713). Richard Bentley (1662–1742) was one of England's foremost classicists, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and a regular contributor to theological debates, particularly through his contributions to the Boyle lectures. On Bentley see, in particular, C. O. Brink, *English classical scholarship: Historical reflections on Bentley, Porson and Housman* (Cambridge 1986); K. L. Haugen, *Richard Bentley: Poetry and Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA 2011).

for the Freethinking cause. This exchange between Anthony Collins and Richard Bentley not only constitutes a focused insight into the rival understandings of Ciceronian Scepticism in existence in the early eighteenth century, it also places those rival understandings in the context of a controversial and provocative intellectual dispute, indicating the as yet unacknowledged significance for the Ciceronian tradition in the radical discourse of the Enlightenment.[4]

The idea that Ciceronian Scepticism might become the subject of a debate over its meaning and importance will come as no surprise to readers of Cicero, as this subject has proved endlessly frustrating to generations of Ciceronian scholars.[5] The school of Academic Scepticism to which Cicero professed affiliation remains ephemeral for two essential reasons: first, because it underwent a number of mutations and revolutions during its history, and second, because its very nature makes it difficult to grasp firmly, defined by a willingness to consider the doctrines of all philosophical schools and rarely reaching a definite conclusion of its own.[6] The disputes that have taken place concerning Cicero's own Academic philosophy reflect this well. Was he a life-long affiliate of the Academic Sceptics, refusing to accept any philosophical teaching as certain and questioning everything, or for a period in the 50s BCE did he show preference for the Old Academy forged by Antiochus of Ascalon, which allowed for the reintroduction of dogma into the Academy?[7] Did he adhere to the more radical scepticism of Arcesilaus, as suggested by several statements in the *Academica*, rejecting entirely the possibility of certainty in philosophical knowledge?[8] Or can he be identified as an adherent of Philonian Scepticism, the approach that maintains that, while nothing can be known for certain and every philosophical claim must be questioned, the doctrine that most closely resembles the 'truth' may be adopted as probable and may be used by the philosopher?[9] The debate between Anthony Collins and Richard Bentley of course does not provide a definitive answer to this question, nor is that a goal of the present discussion, but it does provide an insight into how this debate concerning the nature of Ciceronian Scepticism was conducted in the early Enlightenment.

The very existence of such a dispute over how Ciceronian Scepticism should be understood hints at the influence it might wield in the intellectual discourse of that period, an influence that has yet to be fully acknowledged in scholarship on the Ciceronian tradition.

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[4] For the sake of focus and space this chapter concentrates on a single episode in the history of Ciceronian Scepticism to illustrate the interest it provoked; yet there is a much broader context to the dispute between Bentley and Collins both within Enlightenment and England and within early-modern Europe. Providing an appropriate study of this context is a lengthy undertaking, and I remain in the early stages of that project.

[5] In this context I am using 'Ciceronian Scepticism' to refer to Cicero's personal understanding of the Academic philosophy to which he professed adherence and which he then employed in his philosophical works.

[6] For Cicero's affiliation to the school, see in particular *De natura deorum*, 1.5–12.

[7] This was argued by J. Glucker, 'Cicero's Philosophical Affiliations', in *The question of 'Eclecticism': Studies in later Greek philosophy*, ed. J. M. Dillon and A. A. Long (Berkeley 1988) 34–69.

[8] This much is suggested by Cicero at *Academica* 2.113, *De natura deorum* 1.11, *Tusculan disputations* 2.4, *De divinatione* 2.1, and *De officiis* 2.8.

[9] This is the most popular interpretation, championed by J. Powell, 'Introduction: Cicero's Philosophical Works and their Background', in *Cicero the philosopher: Twelve papers*, ed. J. G. F. Powell (Oxford 1995) 18–23; H. Thorsrud, *Ancient scepticism* (Stocksfield 2009) 84–101; H. Thorsrud, 'Radical and mitigated skepticism in Cicero's *Academica*', in *Cicero's practical philosophy*, ed. W. Nicgorski (Notre Dame 2012) 133–51; A. A. Long, *Hellenistic philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* (London 1974) 229–31.

Studies of the fate of ancient Scepticism have tended to focus on Pyrrhonic Scepticism or, if tracing the development of Ciceronian Scepticism, on Cicero's *Academica*.[10] Yet, as those few studies of the Ciceronian tradition in the Enlightenment reveal, it was Cicero's *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione* and the theological discussions they contained which provoked the most interest amongst Enlightenment thinkers, particularly in England.[11] In the dispute between Collins and Bentley these two issues are forcibly drawn together, as each man's argument concerning the nature of Ciceronian Scepticism is directly linked to how the two theological dialogues should be read and consequently where Cicero might be situated in the religious disputes that were the focus of English intellectuals of the period. Two important points concerning the afterlife of Cicero in the early eighteenth century can be ascertained from Collins' and Bentley's exchange: first, that the full influence of Ciceronian Scepticism in the Enlightenment will only be established through the study of *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione* in addition to the *Academica*, and second, that the Ciceronian tradition continued to wield such authority that two prominent writers were willing to engage in what ultimately amounted to a tug of war over that tradition, each man determined to recruit its power to his own cause.

The present discussion will begin by establishing the form of the dispute between Collins and Bentley over Ciceronian Scepticism, asking how they presented their respective interpretations of that philosophy, before examining the strategies each man employed to endorse those interpretations and make them appear authoritative to their readers. Once the question of how Ciceronian Scepticism was engaged with in the Freethought debate has been answered, the question of why it acquired such importance shall be considered. The debate over Freethought itself will be investigated, as well as the consequences of the differing readings of Ciceronian Scepticism for the function of the Ciceronian tradition within that debate. Throughout, the treatment of Cicero by each author will be compared, so that a sense of the argumentative nature of the works might be ascertained, together with an appreciation of the confrontational nature of this exchange over Cicero and his works.

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Ciceronian Scepticism: doubt or dogma?

As noted above, Collins was determined to claim Cicero as a prominent forefather of the Freethinkers. Cicero's words even feature on the frontispiece of the *Discourse*, endorsing the principles underlying Freethought with the declaration: 'for what can be more degrading than rash judgement, and what can be so rash and unworthy of the serious and sustained attention of a philosopher, as either to hold a false opinion or to defend without hesitation propositions

[10] On Pyrrhonic Scepticism see R. H. Popkin, *The history of scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (New York 2003); L. Floridi, *Sextus Empiricus: The transmission and recovery of Pyrrhonism* (Oxford 2002). On Cicero's *Academica* see C. B. Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus: A study of the influence of the Academica in the Renaissance* (The Hague 1972).

[11] See T. Zieliński, *Cicero im Wandel der Jahrhunderte* (Leipzig and Berlin (4th edn) 1929) 260–302; G. Gawlick, 'Cicero and the Enlightenment', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 25 (1963) 657–82; Tarantino, 'Collins's Cicero' (n. 2, above) 81–100.

inadequately examined and grasped?'[12] At the very beginning of *De natura deorum* these words are spoken by the character of Cicero to justify the Academics' practice of withholding assent on matters of philosophical uncertainty. Collins' choice of these words to adorn the frontispiece of the *Discourse* immediately reveals his intention that Cicero's Academic Scepticism would mirror the philosophy of Freethought itself.

Defining Ciceronian Scepticism <*heading2*>

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For Collins, the Academic philosophy which Cicero professed 'oblig'd him to *examine the Doctrines of all Philosophers*, that he might see there was no Certainty in any of their Schemes'.[13] On this basis, it is little wonder that Collins claimed Cicero as a prominent Freethinker. Invoking Cicero's description of his Academic philosophy in the early part of *De natura deorum*, Collins was able to characterize that philosophy according to its rejection of dogma and its determination to question the basis of all claims, undertakings fundamental to Collins' Freethinking. It is in these passages of *De natura deorum* that Cicero encourages the reader 'to look to the weight of reason rather than authority', as 'students who are keen to learn often find the authority of those who claim to be teachers to be an obstacle, for they cease to apply their own judgement and regard as definitive the solution offered by the mentor of whom they approve', the very trap Collins warns against.[14] Here Cicero defends 'the philosophical method of arguing against every statement, and of refusing to offer positive judgements about anything', the very summary of Cicero's sceptical philosophy presented by Collins.[15] Ciceronian Scepticism as characterized here was indeed a forerunner of Freethought; defined by its rejection of dogma and authority, its elevation of reason, and its refusal to accept the words of others simply on faith, it manifested the philosophy outlined by Collins in the *Discourse*.

For Bentley, however, this was an incomplete, and hence unacceptable, characterization of Ciceronian Scepticism, one he set out to undermine in his response to Collins' work. Bentley argues that, while it was true that Carneades had facilitated a move away from dogma within the Academy, this was motivated more by a desire to exercise greater freedom and not to be confined to only one philosophical system, rather than by a commitment to unassailable doubt. Bentley offers as proof the philosophical system created by Carneades itself, in which certainty could be achieved by stealth: 'he denied the *Certainty of Things*, and admitted of no higher a Knowledge, than *Probability and Verisimilitude*. Not that he did not as much believe, and govern himself in common Life upon what he call'd *Highly Probables*, as the others did upon their *Certains*: but by this pretty Fetch he obtain'd his End, and became

[12] Collins is here quoting *De natura deorum* 1.1: *nil tam temerarium, tamque indignum sapientis gravitate atque constantia, quam, quod non satis explorate perceptum sit & cognitum sine ulla dubitatione defendere* [trans. P. G. Walsh, *Cicero: The nature of the gods. Translated with an introduction and notes* (Oxford 1997)].
[13] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 135.
[14] Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.10: *non enim tam auctoritatis in disputando quam rationis momenta quaerenda sunt. Quin etiam obest plerumque iis qui discere volunt auctoritas eorum qui se docere profitentur; desinunt enim suum iudicium adhibere, id habent ratum quod ab eo quem probant iudicatum vident* [trans. Walsh (n. 12, above)].
[15] Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.11: *ut haec in philosophia ratio contra omnia disserendi nullamque rem aperte iudicandi* [trans. Walsh (n. 12, above)].

Disputant Universal, *Pro omnibus sectis & contra omnes dicebat*'.[16] This was the sceptical philosophy followed by Cicero: certainty was indeed denied, and philosophical beliefs were consistently questioned, but the notion of the *probable* allowed for the adoption of certain ideas as if they were indeed dogma. Bentley may have been disparaging of this, declaring that 'this was their Badge of Servitude, though they boasted of more Freedom, than the others', yet it presented a significantly different approach to understanding Ciceronian Scepticism from that of Collins.[17] Bentley rejected Collins' identification of the Academic philosophy as synonymous with Scepticism, declaring that to present it as such was as much a falsehood as to equate the 'the Popish *or* Lutheran Religion: the difference between Those being as wide as between These'.[18]

Doubt: the proof <heading2>

Inevitably, it was not enough simply to proclaim an understanding of Ciceronian Scepticism and expect it to be accepted; such a position had to be endorsed by a combination of scholarly authority and textual evidence. Collins focuses on legitimizing his definition of Ciceronian Scepticism by providing an interpretation of the text itself, a guide to how to read the Ciceronian text. This guide centres on the two texts that are most important to Collins' broader endeavour: the theological dialogues *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione*.[19]

Collins acknowledges the difficulties posed by these dialogues; confused by the presence of different characters presenting the case of different philosophies, how was the reader to locate Cicero's voice in the melee? There is a clear conflict in *De natura deorum* between the critique of Stoic theism made by Cotta, the Academic Sceptic and hence the representative of Cicero's own philosophical standpoint, and the concluding statement of the work, made in Cicero's own voice, that the Stoic doctrine had proved the most convincing in the debate.[20] Various explanations can be offered for this apparent discrepancy: that the conclusion of *De natura deorum* was deliberately misleading, intended to protect Cicero from the ramifications of the Academic argument; that Cicero truly did prefer the Stoic theology, and he was simply exercising his right as an Academic to select the most probable answer; or finally, that the voice of Cicero in the dialogue is inconsequential, as its main purpose was to demonstrate the Academic method, the testing of different theories to allow for determining which approach was the closest to the truth. The same debate governs discussions of *De divinatione*: was the rationalistic deconstruction of divine providence, presented under Cicero's own name, a genuine representation of Cicero's own views or intended simply to display the Academic

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[16] Bentley, *Remarks upon a late discourse of Free-thinking: in a letter to F. H. D. D. by Phileleutherus Lipsiensis, part the second* (London 1713) 78.
[17] Bentley, *Remarks part the second* (n. 16, above) 79.
[18] Bentley, *Remarks part the second* (n. 16, above) 77.
[19] There is speculation that Collins was in fact responsible for the translation of *De natura deorum* that was produced in 1741: *M. Tullius Cicero of the nature of the gods; in three books. With critical, philosophical, and explanatory notes. To which is added, An enquiry into the astronomy and anatomy of the antients* (London 1741). D. Berman, 'Hume and Collins on miracles', *Hume Studies* 6 (1980) 150–54, argued that it was the work of Collins, while Tarantino, 'Collins's Cicero', 81–82, doubts that identification.
[20] Cicero, *De natura deorum* 3.95.

method in action?[21] It is these questions that drive Collins' interest in Ciceronian Scepticism, for it is through his reading of Ciceronian Scepticism that he is able to make the case that *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione* are Cicero's sceptical challenges to religious authority.

As Collins had already asserted, Cicero identified himself as an Academic; consequently, he then argues, in order to locate Cicero's 'true' voice in the dialogues, it is necessary simply to look to the character of the Academic in those exchanges. There is only one character in *De natura deorum* who reflects the sceptical principles favoured by Collins' Cicero, and that is Cotta; therefore, when reading *De natura deorum*, it is to Cotta the reader should look for Cicero's own view. In the very same text in which Cicero identifies himself with Academic Scepticism and defines that scepticism in the terms identified above, Cotta consistently questions and doubts the dogmas of the Epicurean and Stoic schools, applying reason and natural law to the claims of his interlocutors to test their validity, and finding them lacking. Following this principle of reading, Collins summarises that in this work Cicero 'has endeavour'd to show the Weakness of all the Arguments of the *Stoicks* (who were the great *Theists* of Antiquity) for the Being of the Gods', an endeavour worthy of any Freethinker.[22] The case is easier to make in *De divinatione*, as under his own name Cicero assumes the role of the Academic Sceptic in the debate, questioning and dismissing as irrational the Stoic arguments for divination. Collins' reading of Ciceronian Scepticism therefore allows him to conclude that in *De divinatione* Cicero 'destroy'd the whole Reveal'd Religion of the Greeks and Romans, and show'd the Imposture of all their Miracles, and Weakness of the Reasons on which it was pretended to be founded'.[23] ~~This reading is reciprocally endorsed: Ciceronian Scepticism is the rejection of certainty, hence Cicero's voice must be identified with this stance in the dialogues, or, this must be Cicero's voice in the dialogues, as he is an Academic, hence Cicero's Academic Scepticism must be identified with that displayed in the dialogues.~~ Collins concludes that 'if CICERO'S Readers will follow this Rule of common Sense in understanding him, they will find him as great a *Free-Thinker* as he was a *Philosopher*, an *Orator*, a *Man of Virtue*, and *a Patriot*'.[24]

Dogma: Bentley's rebuttals <heading2>

Founded on an understanding of Ciceronian Scepticism so different from his own, there was little likelihood that Bentley would concur with Collins' hermeneutical strategy for the dialogues. Bentley also looks to *De natura deorum* for evidence, explaining his understanding of the strategy behind its dialogue construction:

> When *Balbus* the *Stoic* had spoken admirably for the Existence of the Gods and Providence, *Cotta* the *Academic* (though he was a Priest, and one of the *Pontifices*)

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[21] For the argument that *De divinatione* was primarily an exercise in the Academic methodology see M. Beard, 'Cicero and divination: the formation of a Latin discourse', *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986) 33–46; M. Schofield, 'Cicero for and against divination', *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986) 47–65. For the argument that it actually represented a sustained attack on divination see F. Santangelo, *Divination, prediction and the end of the Roman Republic* (Cambridge 2013) 10–36.
[22] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 135–36.
[23] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 136.
[24] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 139.

> undertakes the opposite side, *non tam refellere ejus orationem, quam ea quae minus intellexit requirere; not so much to refute his discourse, as to discuss some points he did not fully understand*: and after he had finished his Attack with great copiousness and subtilty, yet in the close he owns to *Balbus*, *That what he had said, was for the Dispute's sake, not his own Judgment; that he both desir'd that Balbus would confute him; and knew certainly that he could do it*.[25]

Cotta and the dialogue structure were intended to provide the opportunity to debate and question, not to reject out of hand the arguments made, as, after all, Cicero's philosophy allowed for the probable. This pursuit of the probable is further endorsed when in *De natura deorum*, at the conclusion of the dialogue, Cicero openly affirms that having heard the arguments of the three schools, he finds the Stoic conception of the divine to be the most probable: 'and what now becomes of our Writer's *True method* and Rule? Whatsoever is spoken under the Person of an *Academic*, is that to be taken for *Cicero's* Sentiment? Why, *Cicero* declares here, that he sided with the *Stoic* against the *Academic*: and whom are we to believe, Himself or our silly Writer?'[26] In fact, Bentley determines that there is little purpose in seeking Cicero's own views in the dialogues, as they are a form of discourse in which the opportunity to dispute overrides any attempt by Cicero to champion a particular philosophy. Bentley advises that 'if we seek therefore for Cicero's true Sentiments; it must not be in his Disputes against Others, where he had licence to say any thing for opposition sake: but in the Books where he dogmatizes himself; where allowing for the word *Probable*, you have all the Spirit and Marrow of the *Platonic*, *Peripatetic*, and *Stoic* Systemes'.[27] But, Bentley's reading does allow for Cicero to ascertain the most probable approach; consequently, on reading *De natura deorum*, it is allowed that Cicero's own views may be associated with the Stoic system to which he pledges his support.

In addition to presenting this alternative approach to reading *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione*, Bentley endeavoured to challenge Collins' interpretation of Ciceronian Scepticism by stripping away at his scholarly authority. Collins has, after all, put himself forward as an interpreter of Cicero, and must demonstrate his capabilities:

> He summons all your Divines to receive his Laws for reading and quoting; and to govern themselves by his Instructions, both in the Pulpit and the Press. But how does this Scenical Commander, this Hero in Buskins perform? So wretchedly and sorrily; so exactly to the same Tune and his wonted Pitch; that he has not struck one right Stroke, either in *Cicero's* general Character, or in any passage of His, that he quotes incidentally.[28]

Bentley's *Remarks* mirror Collins' *Discourse*, taking every opportunity presented to criticise Collins' arguments with a combination of learning, invective, and scorn. So

[25] Bentley, *Remarks part the second* (n. 16, above) 80.
[26] Bentley, *Remarks part the second* (n. 16, above) 80.
[27] Bentley, *Remarks part the second* (n. 16, above) 81.
[28] Bentley, *Remarks part the second* (n. 16, above) 68–69.

comprehensive is Bentley's rebuttal that it has the tendency to descend into pedantry. For example, Bentley begins his discussion with a lengthy critique of Collins' description of Cicero as 'Chief Priest'; this is a term that, in Bentley's view, clearly indicates the *pontifex maximus*, and hence is a completely erroneous title with which to imbue Cicero. Aghast, Bentley asks 'what scandalous and puerile Ignorance is this, in a Teacher forsooth of the Clergy, who are Teachers appointed? *Cicero* the *Chief Priest*? Or rather our Writer the *Chief Blunderer*?'[29] Bentley employs such methods of rebuttal to counter each point made by Collins, whether it had any great importance to his argument or not, aiming to provide a comprehensive demonstration that Collins did not have the learning and understanding to make claims regarding the understanding of Cicero.

Latin is Bentley's primary weapon in this endeavour; arguably the most skilled Latinist of his generation, he deployed that expertise against Collins' efforts at erudition. During an earlier portion of the *Discourse*, Collins had quoted a passage from the second book of *De divinatione*, placing the English in the text and the Latin in a footnote.[30] This translation is taken apart by Bentley word by word:

> Now it shall appear; that our Author has misconstru'd almost every Part and *Comma* of this Passage; that he has made the First parts contradict the Last, and so has put his own Nonsense upon the great Original, that he has weakened his own design, and made the Place speak with less strength against Superstition, than it really does; what apprehensions are we to have of so formidable a Writer?[31]

The sense of Cicero's words as interpreted by Collins is disputed, as when he translates *sive tu vatem, sive tu omen audieris* as 'if you go to a prophet, or regard omens', prompting Bentley to demand where in the text Collins found the Latin for 'go' and 'regard'.[32] Or when Collins translates *si ostenti simile natum factumve quippiam* as 'or such-like prodigy happens' when, Bentley insists, *ostenti simile* should be translated as 'like', thereby modifying the sentence to 'or something like a prodigy happens', emphasising the role of 'Cicero' in this discourse as the disputer of divination.

The exchange between Collins and Bentley represents a struggle for mastery over the Ciceronian text, as each man seeks to claim the authority to interpret Cicero, as Bentley's condemnation of Collins makes clear: 'even my Pen would refuse to be employ'd in such Trash; where it not to chastise our Writer's Confidence; who unqualified to understand one single Page of Cicero, presumes to set up for his Commender and Patron … nay (which all Muses avert) for his Revisor and Editor. Your Gentry, it seems, were hence forward to tast *Cicero* through the fetid and poisonous Notes of the *Atheistical* Sect'.[33] At the basis of this struggle are two different readings of Ciceronian Scepticism, with their consequences for how *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione* could be understood. Why were these differing readings so significant as to merit this battle for authority over the Ciceronian text?

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[29] Bentley, *Remarks part the second* (n. 15, above) 69.
[30] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 35–36, quoting Cicero, *De divinatione* 2.149.
[31] Bentley, *Remarks* (n. 3, above) 36.
[32] Bentley, *Remarks* (n. 3, above) 36.
[33] Bentley, *Remarks part the second* (n. 16, above) 75.

Cicero, the Freethinker

The answer to this lies in the function assumed by Cicero in Collins' argument for the importance of Freethought, and the need for every man to be at liberty to think freely, accepting as true what has been shown to be rational and evidence-based, rather than endorsed by authority alone. While championing this philosophy was the unifying theme of Collins' *Discourse*, it was the ramifications of such an attitude to belief for the Church that both galvanised the text and provoked such furious responses from its critics. Collins' *Discourse* was in its essentials a challenge to the authority the clergy possessed over the minds and ideas of the laity, and it was in serving this purpose that Cicero became Collins' most valuable weapon, 'because CICERO'S Works are so frequently cited against *Free-Thinkers* both from the Pulpit and the Press, and his Example recommended for their Conviction; it may not be amiss utterly to disarm the Enemys of Free-Thinking of Cicero's Authority'.[34] This section will first establish the strongly anticlerical function of the *Discourse*, before demonstrating how Cicero was shaped to function as a tool in this project, first into a critic of superstition, then as a champion of a natural religion that rendered the religious fear at the base of superstition powerless.

Priestcraft <heading2>

Collins was a prominent heterodox writer, whose works consistently challenged the right claimed by the clergy to interpret the Scripture on behalf of the laity and the special powers they claimed for themselves as interpreters of divine will, claims to power commonly termed 'priestcraft' by Collins and his fellow Radicals.[35] Anticlerical discourse had grown in force since the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 had facilitated a tide of controversial publications, primarily challenging the extensive power of the Church in both the secular and spiritual spheres. Collins had already contributed to these attacks, arguing in his *Essay Concerning the Use of Reason* in 1707 that the clergy had deliberately placed the mysteries of religion beyond the reason of man, and challenging the power of the Episcopacy in 1710 in his *Priestcraft in Perfection*.[36] By 1713 the hostility engendered by the clergy was particularly virulent, exacerbated as it was by fear: the Tories, notoriously sympathetic to the High Church elements, had achieved power; with that power they had made the Treaty of Utrecht with France to end the War of the Spanish Succession, a Treaty accused of undermining Protestant liberties in Europe and reinstating the papal threat; and Henry

[34] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 137.

[35] On the war on priestcraft in early modern England see J. Champion, *The pillars of priestcraft shaken: The Church of England and its enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge 1992) 1–24, 173–79; J. Champion, *Republican learning: John Toland and the crisis of Christian culture, 1696–1722* (Manchester 2003) 97; M. Goldie, 'Priestcraft and the birth of Whiggism', in *Political discourse in early modern Britain*, ed. N. Phillipson and Q. Skinner (Cambridge 1993) 209–31 (209–11); N. Aston and M. Cragoe, *Anticlericalism in Britain, c. 1500–1914* (Stroud 2001).

[36] A. Collins, *An essay concerning the use of reason in propositions, the evidence whereof depends upon human testimony* (London 1707) 11–16; A. Collins, *Priestcraft in perfection: or, a detection of the fraud of inserting this clause – The Church hath power to decree rites and ceremonys, and authority in controversys of faith – in the twentieth Article of the Articles of the Church of England* (London 1710).

Sacheverell, the High Churchman who had so fiercely attacked the incursions upon the Church's authority in 1710, had been celebrated far and wide, contributing to the Tory success over the Whigs. At the point when Collins was writing the *Discourse*, there was a definite sense that the power of the Church was resurgent under a more sympathetic administration.

Little wonder then, that in the *Discourse* Collins argued that the main culprit for the inhibition of Freethought was the clergy: it was the clergy who assumed the position of guides and interpreters on behalf of the laity, claiming man's inability to comprehend for himself divine truths; it was they who deliberately obscured and confused the meaning of the Scripture to render it inaccessible to men; and it was they who encouraged and fostered divisions within the country by accusing any who disagreed with them or challenged them of atheism.[37] Due to these machinations by the clergy,

> We have no way of settling ourselves in a right Notion of God; in the Reception of the present Canon of Scripture, and that Sacred *Greek* Text of the New Testament which is commonly printed; and in the Belief of the Doctrine and Practice of the Discipline and Worship of the *Church of England*, as founded on that pure Text; nor can we be easy in our own Minds, under the Prejudice and Difficultys which the Priests put into us against these Truths, but by ceasing to rely on them, and *thinking freely* for our selves.[38]

The clergy misuse their power and deceive the laity with fraudulent accounts of the faith and contradictory understandings of the Scripture; it is only by learning to think freely that men will find themselves able to conceive a clear understanding of the nature of God. This philosophy is directed towards equipping men with the means to establish their liberty from the civil and spiritual tyranny of the priests.

This was anathema to Richard Bentley. In addition to his scholarly endeavours, Bentley was a clergyman and one of the foremost champions of the rational Anglicanism which evolved from the impact of the work of Isaac Newton.[39] Bentley used the opportunity presented by the Boyle Lectures in 1692 and 1694 to present Newtonian physics as an understanding of the universe entirely in accordance with Anglicanism, due to the space granted by this mechanical view of the Universe for the active role of the Divine.[40] Bentley's contribution was rewarded with election to the Royal Society, a bastion of Anglican rationalism. By 1713 Bentley had aspirations concerning the soon to be vacant Regius chair in Cambridge and plans to produce a completely new recension of the text of the New Testament, both of which goals were served by directing a response against Collins' *Discourse*. In his *Remarks* Bentley's attempts to demolish Collins' Freethought and to defend

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[37] See, in particular, Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 46–99.
[38] Bentley, *Remarks* (n. 3, above) 98–99.
[39] 'Anglican rationalism' is a term used here for expediency, to encompass the acceptance within certain elements of the Church of a natural religion, in which the role of God was confined to the orchestrator of the mechanical system governing the universe. For a discussion of the terminology see J. G. A. Pocock, 'Within the margins: the definitions of orthodoxy', in *The Margins of heterodoxy: Heterodox writing and cultural response, 1660–1750*, ed. R. D. Lund (Cambridge 1995) 33–53.
[40] On this period in his life see Haugen, *Richard Bentley* (n. 3, above) 100–23.

the Church against attacks gave him the occasion to advertise himself as a potential Regius chair, while also exercising his skill as a biblical critic ahead of his work on the New Testament. Bentley is clear from the beginning that he considers the charge of priestcraft laughable:

> 'Tis a firm persuasion among them, That there are but two sorts in Mankind, Deceivers and Deceiv'd, Cheats and Fools. Hence it is, that dreaming and waking they have one perpetual Theme, Priestcraft … And the Surmise in both Cases must procede from the same Cause; either a very corrupt Heart, or a crazy and crackbrain'd Head, or, as it often happens, Both.[41]

The clergy and the crimes of which they stand accused lie at the heart of this dispute between Collins and Bentley, and it is in relation to this that the question of Ciceronian Scepticism reveals its importance.

Superstition <heading2>

During his discussion of Ciceronian Scepticism and the theological dialogues, there is one point that exercises Collins in particular, namely that the clergy identify arguments in those dialogues favourable to superstition, and use them as if they represented Cicero's true views:

> Now the modern Priests, whenever they meet with any Passage favourable to *Superstition*, which CICERO puts in the mouth of the *Stoick*, or any false Argument which he makes the *Epicurean* use … they urge it as CICERO'S own, and would have the Reader believe CICERO looked on it as conclusive.[42]

This is completely unacceptable to Collins, who sets about using his discussion of Ciceronian Scepticism to demonstrate that, when read properly, these works actually reveal that Cicero was an ardent opponent of superstition:

> And [in Cicero's works] they will never meet with any Passages which in the least favour Superstition, but what he plainly throws out to save himself from Danger, or to show his Rhetorical Ability on any Argument, or employs in his *Orations* to recommend himself to the *Roman Mob*, who, like all other *Mobs*, were extremely superstitious, and differ'd not from the *present Generation* at *Rome*, but in having a more innocent and less absurd *Superstition*.[43]

Collins elevates *De divinatione* as a source for Cicero's true position on divine providence, arguing that 'in his Discourse of *Divination* [Cicero] baffles all the *Stoical* Arguments for Superstition, openly under his own name'.[44] If the words spoken by the

[41] Bentley, *Remarks* (n. 3, above) 12.
[42] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 138.
[43] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 139–140.
[44] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 138.

character of Cicero in *De divinatione* are taken to reflect his true position, then it does indeed reflect a hostility to superstitious practices; throughout the second book of that work Cicero sets about confounding the arguments made for divinatory practices by subjecting them to rational examination. He repeatedly refers to the traditional religious practices that had been described as superstitions: 'what wonder, then, if in auspices and in every kind of divination weak minds should adopt the superstitious practices which you have mentioned and should be unable to discern the truth?'[45] In the second book of *De divinatione* Cicero not only identified those religious practices which depended on divine providence as superstitions, he also clearly articulated a belief that those superstitions should be eradicated. Towards the end of the book he declares that 'just as it is a duty to extend the influence of true religion, which is closely associated with the knowledge of nature, so it is a duty to weed out every root of superstition'.[46] By arguing that the nature of Ciceronian Scepticism necessitates the identification of the real Cicero with the character of Cicero in *De divinatione*, Collins provides himself with a powerful weapon to deploy against superstition.

It is a weapon he does not hesitate to use. In the second section of the *Discourse*, as Collins argues for the need for men to be able to think freely on the nature of God and the Scriptures, he lays out his argument that 'there is no remedy for the great Evil of Superstition, but thinking freely on these Points'.[47] Collins begins with the assertion that 'Superstition is an Evil which either by the means of Education, or the natural Weakness of Men, oppresses almost all Mankind', before citing Cicero as evidence for how even the ancients recognised just how formidable an evil was superstition.[48] The passage quoted comes from *De divinatione* 2.149, as evidence not only that someone as respected as Cicero recognised the evils of superstition, but also to show that those practices that Cicero considered superstitions were those based around divine providence.

> If you give way to Superstition, it will ever haunt and plague you. If you got to a Prophet, or regard Omens; if you sacrifice or observe the Flight of Birds; if you consult an Astrologer or Haruspex; if it thunders or lightens, or any place is consum'd with Lightning, or such-like Prodigy happens (as it is necessary some such often should) all the Tranquillity of the Mind is destroy'd. And Sleep it self, which seems to be an Asylum and Refuge from all Trouble and Uneasiness, does by the aid of Superstition increase your Troubles and Fears.[49]

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[45] Cicero, *De divinatione* 2.81: *quid mirum igitur, si in auspiciis et in omni divinatione imbecilli animi superstitiosa ista concipiant, verum dispicere non possint*? [trans. W. A. Falconer, *Cicero: De senectute, De amicitia, De divinatione. With an English translation* (Cambridge, MA, and London 1923)]. See also *De divinatione* 2.19, 83, 85, 86, 100, 125, 129.

[46] Cicero, *De divinatione* 2.149: *ut religio propaganda etiam est, quae est iuncta cum cognitione naturae, sic superstitionis stirpes omnes eiiciendae* [trans. Falconer (n. 44, above)].

[47] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) iv.

[48] Collins, *Discourse* (n.1, above) 35.

[49] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 35–36, translating Cicero, *De divinatione* 2.149: *instat enim et urget et, quo te cumque verteris, persequitur, sive tu vatem sive tu omen audieris, sive immolaris sive avem aspexeris, si Chaldaeum, si haruspicem videris, si fulserit, si tonuerit, si tactum aliquid erit de caelo, si ostenti simile natum factumve quippiam; quorum necesse est plerumque aliquid eveniat, ut numquam liceat quieta mente consistere. [See author queries**]*

According to Collins' Cicero, superstition is the belief in acts that contravene the truth of religion; moreover, it is belief in the validity of practices that assume the existence of a providential God able to contravene the laws of nature through the provision of prodigies and other forms of direct communication. Cicero argues throughout the second book of *De divinatione* that superstition feeds on man's irrationality and the fear that lack of reason breeds.[50] This is neatly recruited by Collins to serve his argument, in which Freethought will overcome superstition as it will liberate men's minds from such irrational fears: 'now there is no just Remedy to this universal Evil but *Free-Thinking*. By that alone we can understand the true Causes of things, and by consequence the Unreasonableness of all superstitious Fears'.[51] In Collins' *Discourse*, and by virtue of his reading of Ciceronian Scepticism, Cicero not only condemns superstition, but also becomes a champion for its eradication through rational thinking.

The characterization of superstition drawn from Cicero by Collins proves extremely useful for the direction of this argument against the *Discourse*'s primary target, the clergy. As Collins furthers his indictment of superstition, he identifies the Church as particularly culpable for its fostering, through its insistence on threatening retribution in the afterlife if the rites and actions it dictates are not adhered to: 'superstitious Men are incapable of believing in a perfectly just and good God. They make him talk to all Mankind from corners, and consequently require things of Men under the Sanction of Misery in the next World, of which they are incapable of having any convincing Evidence that they come from him'.[52] Collins accuses the clergy of seeking to perpetuate such superstitions as a means of enhancing their own power. Their power emanates from their position as interpreters of religion and even of divine will, and as such it is in their interests to maintain the belief that such interpretation is necessary: 'the Conduct of the Priests, who are the chief Pretenders to be Guides to others in matters of Religion, makes *Free-Thinking* on *the Nature and Attributes of the Eternal Being or God*, on *the Authority of the Scriptures*, and on *the Sense of the Scriptures*, unavoidable'.[53] The clergy become the chief inhibitors of man's natural reason, determined to maintain the spiritual tyranny by insisting that some matters of religion are simply beyond man's understanding. Set beside the Ciceronian understanding of superstition deployed by Collins, this makes the clergy appear to be the defenders of superstition, rather than its primary opposition.

Bentley, as both a clergyman and a staunch defender of the Church, vociferously condemns Collins' summation of both the nature of superstition and its presence in the Church. Collins' rejection of certain religious practices as superstitious is deployed to characterise his Freethought philosophy as a poorly disguised atheism:

> One of his Capital Arguments is from the *Evil of* SUPERSTITION, which *terrible Evil* and *great Vice* can never be avoided, but by turning *Free-thinker*, that is (in plainer *English*) abandoning all Religion. Strange! That *Superstition* and *Religion*, which have

[50] See, for example, Cicero, *De divinatione* 2.83–85.
[51] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 37.
[52] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 38.
[53] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 46.

> been distinguish'd and divided this two thousand Years, should yet stick so fast together, that our Author cannot separate them: so that to ease himself of One, he must abdicate Both.[54]

Instead of a continuation of Cicero's separation of *superstitio* and *religio*, with *superstitio* being jettisoned while *religio* is protected, Bentley sees Collins' efforts as a broad rejection of religion. Collins had fundamentally misunderstood Cicero's point in the passage quoted – a point Bentley reinforces with his long dissection of Collins' translation of said passage – and produced an interpretation of *superstitio* fundamentally at odds with Cicero's position:

> His dismal Description of [superstition] is in the words of Cicero; which chiefly relate to little Bigotries in Civil Life, not to fabulous Conceptions about the Supreme Being. And his Inference from thence is exactly, as if I should now say to You: *Sir*, you must renounce your Baptism and Faith, or else you can never be rid of those *terrible Superstitions* about the *Death-watch*, *Thirteen at one Table*, *Spilling of Salt*, and *Childermas-day*.[55]

Bentley strives to disarm Collins of Ciceronian superstition by both questioning his basic understanding of the text and also by using his reading of Ciceronian Scepticism to neutralise *De divinatione*'s power. Bentley's approach to *De divinatione* is echoed in many modern scholarly treatments of the work: he assesses it according to the methodology by which the Academic school was defined.[56] Bentley argues that in the *Academica*, *De finibus*, *De natura deorum*, and *De divinatione* a dispute takes place in which a question is proposed, the differing philosophical stances heard, considered, and refuted, all with the primary goal of testing their ideas and conclusions. The idea that these works should be read to determine Cicero's own philosophy is therefore dismissed as ultimately a misunderstanding of the purpose of the dialogues. If that is your goal, Bentley directs you to the treatises. *De divinatione* was not a refutation of divine providence, it was a dispute intended to reveal the two sides of the question, so that the reader may reach their own decision. By using it to characterise Cicero as hostile to divine providence, Collins revealed a deep misunderstanding of both the dialogue form and Cicero's own philosophy.

Religious fear <heading2>

At the basis of the arguments made against divination in the second book of *De divinatione* was the belief that true religious practice must accord with the laws of nature and reason; this is in evidence throughout Cicero's rebuttals of Quintus' examples with rational argument, and in those passages at the conclusion of the book in which *superstitio* and *religio* are separated on the basis of *religio*'s accordance with nature. The idea that religious belief should accord with reason and nature appealed greatly to Collins, whose reading of Ciceronian Scepticism allowed him to shape Cicero further into not only the enemy of

[54] Bentley, *Remarks* (n. 3, above) 34.
[55] Bentley, *Remarks* (n. 3, above) 34–35.
[56] Bentley, *Remarks part the second* (n. 16, above) 73.

superstition, but also the champion of a natural religion in which such irrational religious fear had no place. When summarising *De natura deorum*, as noted above, Collins claimed that Cicero 'has endeavour'd to show the Weakness of all the Arguments of the *Stoicks* … for the Being of the Gods'.[57] This understanding was based on the belief that Cicero's voice must be identified with that of the character articulating the stance of the Academic Sceptic, in this case Cotta. Cotta's arguments responding to the case made by Balbus the Stoic challenge the belief in a providential God, preferring instead the idea that the divine was confined by the laws of nature and reason.[58]

This rejection of a providential God due to the religious fear such a belief engendered was central to Collins' own endeavour in the *Discourse*; it was by eliminating fear of such a God, he argued, that all superstitious fears could be eradicated, and consequently the power of the clergy. Freethought, such as that displayed by Cicero-as-Cotta in *De natura deorum*, was the means by which men could be liberated from this misconception of the divine:

> For by *Free-Thinking* alone Men are capable of knowing, that a perfectly Good, Just, Wise and Powerful Being made and governs the World; and from this Principle they know, that he can require nothing of Men in any Country or Condition of Life, but that whereof he has given them an opportunity of being convinc'd by Evidence and Reason in the Place where they are, and in that Condition of Life to which Birth or any other Chance has directed them; that an honest and rational Man can have no just reason to fear any thing from him: nay, on the contrary, must have so great a Delight and Satisfaction in believing such a Being exists, that he can much better be suppos'd to fear lest no such Being should exist, than to fear any harm from him.[59]

A rational man, permitted to think freely, has all he needs to recognise the truth of God, as that God is a natural entity, bound by the laws of reason, not a supernatural, providential being beyond man's understanding. Permitting men the liberty to reason for themselves is therefore the only way for true religion to be practised.

Collins, having established Cicero as an advocate of this natural religion, is then able to direct Cicero against two of the primary sources of the religious fear galvanizing superstitious belief, and hence the power of the clergy: fear of God and fear of punishment in the afterlife. In support of the first, Collins cites an instance from the first book of *De inventione* in which Cicero declared as a probable opinion that those who study philosophy do not believe that there are any Gods.[60] Collins interprets this to mean that Cicero – representing the views of all philosophers – did not believe that the Gods existed in the form in which they were popularly understood, as vengeful beings able to inflict punishment for misdeeds. Bentley is swift to challenge this evidence for Cicero's rejection of the providential divine, once more turning his superior facility as a classical scholar against Collins' use of the material. Bentley

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[57] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 135–36.
[58] See, for example, Cicero, *De natura deorum* 3.28. See also D. Fott, 'The politico-philosophical character of Cicero's verdict in *De Natura Deorum*', in *Cicero's practical philosophy*, ed. W. Nicgorski (Notre Dame 2012) 152–80 (163–68).
[59] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 37.
[60] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 136, quoting Cicero, *De inventione* 1.46.

uses this passage from *De inventione* to suggest Cicero's doubt concerning the nature of God was completely misinterpreted by Collins. Cicero had provided two examples of probable opinions, both of which were intended to represent generally held opinions which were not necessarily true – false probables – and which Cicero himself did not accept. The first example Cicero had provided was that torments await the impious after death, the second was the above-quoted notion that philosophers were by default atheists. Bentley maintains that the two examples must be taken together; consequently Collins must either hold that Cicero does not believe in the gods, but does believe in torments after death, or vice versa. Bentley's disbelief at Collins' ineptitude is somewhat theatrical in its expression: 'O Dulness, if this was done by chance! O Knavery, if it was done by design!'[61]

Regarding the fear of the afterlife, Collins refers his reader to the *Tusculan disputations* and Cicero's apparent rejection of the immortality of the soul after having considered the different understandings of the nature of the soul put forward by the different philosophers.[62] Cicero appears to reject Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul, to which his interlocutor responds that he would rather be wrong with Plato than right with any of the others. Again, Bentley tackles Collins' interpretation of the text. Bentley produces an extensive critique of Collins' identification of the interlocutor A in the dialogue as Atticus. Bentley makes the case that A instead indicates that the interlocutor is *adulescens*, for Cicero refers to the youth of this character, at a point when Atticus advanced him by two years. Collins' credibility as an interpreter of the text thereby challenged, Bentley then turns to the conclusion Collins' drew from the work. In the passage in question, Cicero had in fact produced seven arguments against the immortality of the soul, arguments to which the comment isolated by Collins pertains, and three in favour, which are presented subsequently in the text and also receive Cicero's affirmation. Characteristically Bentley does not prevaricate regarding his opinion of Collins' efforts:

> What then was our Writer's Soul? Was it *Brains*, or *Gutts*, or rather *Nothing at all*, when he thus maim'd and murder'd the Sense of his Author … But our Writer has so long desponded *of mounting up to Heaven*: that he cannot bear it even in the Stile of a Pagan: it raises an envious Despair, and spreads it over his Soul. A most just and proper punishment for such Reprobates to Immortality![63]

In Collins' *Discourse*, Cicero assumes the form of a model Freethinker: he rejects superstition in religion, challenging the presence of practices and rituals that do not adhere to reason; he also advocates a natural religion, in which those beliefs which most forcefully drive the religious fear on which superstitions are based have no place. This is a vision of religion in which men can be free to judge and consider for themselves what to believe, rather than have that belief dictated to them by figures of authority.

Conclusion

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[61] Bentley, *Remarks part the second* (n. 16, above) 71.
[62] Collins, *Discourse* (n. 1, above) 136–37, referring to Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 1.24.
[63] Bentley, *Remarks part the second* (n. 15, above) 74–75.

When in 1713 Anthony Collins and Richard Bentley conducted this exchange over the nature of Ciceronian Scepticism, with its consequences for how *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione* should be understood, several points concerning the afterlife of Cicero became clear. First, that Ciceronian Scepticism was still the subject of active scholarship; this dispute over how it should be read, partnered with the scholarly engagement deployed by both Bentley and Collins to enforce their respective readings, demonstrate that this sceptical tradition remained influential into the early Enlightenment. Second, that in order to fully appreciate the extent of that influence, the fate of *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione* in the religious discourse of the period must be examined; when debating Ciceronian Scepticism, it was around these theological dialogues that Collins structured his discussion, and Bentley consequently structured his response. Third, that the interest in both Ciceronian Scepticism and the theological dialogues was driven by their potential to shape the role played by the Ciceronian tradition in the Freethinking and anticlerical disputes represented by Collins' and Bentley's works. According to how Ciceronian Scepticism was read, *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione* provided evidence that Cicero was either a theist, accepting of the providential God and traditional religion, or that Cicero was a religious sceptic, advocating a natural, rational religion and disputing the supernatural powers attributed to the divine. These works could prove powerful tools in the religious debates dominating intellectual discourse in early eighteenth-century England.

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It was not simply as sources or examples that these works could be employed. As Collins' efforts show, the opportunity was there to construct Cicero into a model Freethinker, as a forebear of that tradition. Through a judicious approach to Cicero's philosophy and writings, it was possible to identify a Cicero whose beliefs and attitudes appeared to foretell the radical stances held by men like Anthony Collins. The commitment with which Richard Bentley sought to expose and undermine such a characterisation of Cicero reveals just how potentially powerful it was, and indeed how influential and authoritative the Ciceronian tradition remained at this crucial point in the intellectual history of England.

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